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Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples

Summary record of the 7th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on 13 June 2005, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Hunte ..... (Saint Lucia)

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05-38207 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Special Committee decision of 14 June 2004 concerning Puerto Rico (*continued*)
(A/AC.109/2005/L.3 and A/AC.109/2005/L.7)

Hearing of petitioners (*continued*)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairman, Ms. Rexach (National Advancement for Puerto Rican Culture) took a place at the petitioners' table.*

2. **Ms. Rexach** (National Advancement for Puerto Rican Culture) said that Puerto Rico had an elected Government and could not therefore be regarded as a colony. In 1917, Congress had passed a law granting American citizenship to all Puerto Ricans and the inhabitants of the island wanted to exercise their constitutional rights, in particular the right to vote in Presidential elections. There was no justification for the current disenfranchisement of more than three million American citizens.

3. Many Puerto Ricans had fought in the United States Armed Forces and had lost their lives while defending the principles of freedom and equality enshrined in the Constitution of the United States. However, they had no representation in Congress or the Senate. Furthermore, the current Puerto Rican Constitution, which had been tailored and authorized by the United States Congress, made it very clear that Federal law would take precedence in all circumstances.

4. She called on the President of the United States to put an end to the long-standing discrimination against Puerto Ricans by granting the island statehood. Congress had a moral obligation to formally define the legal and political relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, thereby enabling all Puerto Ricans to enjoy all the rights incumbent upon them as American citizens.

5. *Ms. Rexach withdrew.*

6. *At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Adames (Al Frente) took a place at the petitioners' table.*

7. **Mr. Adames** (Al Frente) said that, for almost a century, Puerto Rico had been treated as a state of the United States in almost every way. All Puerto Ricans were American citizens and the island was governed in the same way as the other states of the Union. The Supreme Court of the United States recognized the jurisdiction of the island's courts and the Governor of Puerto Rico had even been elected Chairman of the National Governors Association of the United States.

8. However, in the absence of a declaration of statehood, Puerto Ricans faced considerable discrimination. Though subject to the same rules and obligations as the inhabitants of other states, they did not enjoy the same civil rights and protections as other American citizens. Puerto Rican soldiers had given their lives in order to defend the democracy, freedom and interests of the United States, yet the island's development was being hindered because its inhabitants were not represented in Congress or the Senate and were not permitted to vote in Presidential elections.

9. More than 3 million Puerto Ricans had migrated to the mainland; ironically, as soon as they became resident in the United States, they instantly acquired all the rights that had been denied to them on the island. Since the only obstacle to the declaration of statehood was political discrimination, some special interest groups were talking of colonialism; those who opposed the declaration of statehood were acting selfishly to preserve their own political and economic interests. The continued attempts to deny Puerto Ricans full American citizenship ran counter to the principles of democracy, and must stop.

10. The United Nations must make sense of history and call on the United States Congress to declare the island's statehood as soon as possible. It was time to end the longstanding discrimination that had relegated Puerto Ricans to a kind of second-class citizenship.

11. *Mr. Adames withdrew.*

12. *At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Bhatia (Executive Director, Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration) took a place at the petitioners' table.*

13. **Mr. Bhatia** (Executive Director, Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration), speaking on behalf of the Governor of Puerto Rico, said that he wished to present his Government's official position regarding the self-determination of Puerto Rico. The lengthy, costly and frustrating discussion about the future relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States had divided Puerto Ricans and distracted them from urgent issues such as education, job creation and security.

14. The current Governor of Puerto Rico, Mr. Acevedo Vilá, had clearly demonstrated his commitment to a self-determination process that was independent of political affiliations and preferred status options. The Government's official position was to develop a truly democratic, inclusive plan that respected ideological differences among Puerto Ricans and included not only political parties, but also civil society. The only way to reach consensus and resolve the issue democratically was to put aside divisions regarding status preferences. The aspirations of the Puerto Rican people would be realized by working openly and allowing the people themselves to decide.

15. Recalling that the General Assembly itself had stated that the greatest deference would be given to the aspirations of the Puerto Rican people should they wish to change their mutually agreed relationship with the United States, he said that, in order to define those aspirations, his Government was advocating a new procedural mechanism for self-determination: a constitutional assembly on the status of the Puerto Rican people. The five key points of that new mechanism were as follows: the process must begin in Puerto Rico; the assembly must not be monopolized by the political parties; the people must be consulted outside general election years; the process must be fair and inclusive; and there must be interaction with the United States President and Congress. Supporters of the different political ideologies in Puerto Rico had the right to present their arguments in such a forum. The debate could not continue in a fragmented manner, as the two sides simply accused each other and never got beyond discussing their differences. While the current Governor and his Administration favoured a constitutional assembly, they firmly believed that the Puerto Rican people must choose the procedural mechanism and had therefore clearly stated that they would fully accept the decision of the people. If the idea of a constitutional assembly were accepted, its representatives, numbering no more than 100, would be chosen through special elections on the basis of the principle of one citizen, one vote. The new proposal enjoyed the support of many sectors of Puerto Rican society, members and representatives of political parties in Puerto Rico, elected officials in the United States — including several members of Congress — and many Puerto Ricans residing in the United States.

16. The Government was determined to reach consensus. It remained convinced that such an important decision could not rest in the hands of the political parties alone, and it firmly opposed processes aimed at imposing status options that did not reflect the democratic will of the people. For that reason, it strongly believed that the constitutional assembly was the ideal procedural mechanism through which to exercise the self-determination of the Puerto Rican people, for such an assembly would be an exercise in participatory and representative democracy, allow the decision of the people to be discussed and negotiated over time, presuppose dialogue and negotiation with the United States and ensure that any conclusion or recommendation was subject to approval by the Puerto Rican people.

17. *Mr. Bhatia withdrew.*

18. *At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Pérez (Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano) took a place at the petitioners' table.*

19. **Mr. Muriente Pérez** (Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano) welcomed the comprehensive draft resolution on Puerto Rico that was currently before the Committee. The reference to the 22 previous resolutions and decisions on the question of Puerto Rico adopted by the Committee, in particular those adopted without a vote in recent years, and the fact that the Committee had taken note of the debate in Puerto Rico on the search for a procedure that would make it possible to launch the process of decolonization, were particularly gratifying.

20. In that context, the ongoing debate in Puerto Rico on the establishment of a constitutional assembly on the status of the Puerto Rican people was highly significant. In spite of a number of obstacles, that debate had moved on apace, and a growing number of Puerto Ricans of all political affiliations now regarded the proposed assembly as an indispensable tool in the search for consensus.

21. The principal aim of the Puerto Rican people, namely to ensure that the United States recognized their inalienable right to self-determination and independence, was in keeping with paragraph 5 of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) and was also reflected in the draft resolution currently before the Committee. Efforts had been made to ensure that the constitutional assembly would contribute to the achievement of that aim and enable the island to

overcome the tribalism, sectarianism and fragmentation to which it had long been subjected.

22. Increasing numbers of Puerto Ricans were beginning to reject the social, economic and political situation of the country. Although the population did not always make the connection between their social anxiety and their quasi-colonial status, the two were inextricably linked. Increased drug use and trafficking, high suicide and homicide rates, a structural economic crisis and environmental degradation were all symptoms of the larger political problem.

23. When Puerto Rico had begun its transformation from an impoverished sugar plantation into a modern industrial centre, it had been decided that there were too many Puerto Ricans on the island; consequently, a mass exodus to the United States had taken place. Both those who had remained on the island and those who had left had been promised a better life. Now, six decades later, the 4 million Puerto Ricans resident in the United States outnumbered their compatriots in Puerto Rico; most of them were living in deplorable conditions. Fifty-eight per cent of those left behind on the island were living in poverty.

24. While many of the economic and social problems facing Puerto Rico were the same as those facing other countries, the Puerto Rican population had endured over 500 years of colonial rule and had never had the opportunity to take its own decisions freely. It was high time that Puerto Rico threw off the yoke of colonialism and joined the ranks of sovereign nations.

25. *Mr. Pérez withdrew.*

26. *At the invitation of the Chairman, Ms. Velez-Mitchell (Primavida Inc.) took a place at the petitioners' table.*

27. **Ms. Velez-Mitchell** (Primavida Inc.) said that Puerto Rico was an ancient nation and a commonwealth, just like Massachusetts. Indeed, although American history books omitted to mention it, Ponce de León, the first white man ever to set foot in Florida had been Governor of Puerto Rico. Although Puerto Ricans were American citizens, and had been drafted and obliged to fight in every war, they continued to be politically disenfranchised and were denied the right to vote in Presidential elections.

28. Noting that one in seven people in the United States of America could be described as "Hispanic", she said that Puerto Ricans had the same racial background – a mix of so-called Indians, Europeans and Africans – as all the other people of North, Central and South America. Every one of the nations that comprised the Americas had a distinct culture and society; their inhabitants could not be lumped together. In that connection, she hoped that the United Nations would work to adopt a resolution to combat racism, with a view to ensuring that every individual was viewed as a person rather than as a member of a specific race.

29. *Ms. Velez-Mitchell withdrew.*

30. *At the invitation of the Chairman, Ms. Cintron Pabon (Hormiguero Pro-State 51) took a place at the petitioners' table.*

31. **Ms. Cintron Pabon** (Hormiguero Pro-State 51) said that, although Hormiguero, her home town, was a pleasant and well-populated town, there was also considerable poverty. Puerto Ricans needed to face that reality and help each other. As a Christian, she called on the Committee to act in line with God's law. It was time to put an end to the current situation and decide once and for all on a serious and formal status for Puerto Rico, whether that took the form of self-determination or full integration as the fifty-first State of the United States of America.

32. *Ms. Cintron Pabon withdrew.*

Draft resolution A/AC.109/2005/L.7

33. **Mr. Requeijo Gual** (Cuba), introducing draft resolution A/AC.109/2005/L.7, said that his country had a historical commitment to Puerto Rico dating from the time when both countries had been under Spanish domination. Cuba and Puerto Rico had remained Spanish colonies until 1898 when they had been occupied by North America, and their citizens had supported each other in their respective struggles for independence. More than a century on, those bonds were being maintained and consolidated.

34. As in previous years, the draft resolution recognized the inalienable right of the people of Puerto Rico to self-determination and independence in conformity with General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) and reiterated the request to the President of the United States to release all Puerto Rican political prisoners still serving sentences for causes related to the struggle for the independence of Puerto Rico and peace in Vieques.

35. While the United States Navy from Vieques had now departed, the people of Vieques were still awaiting the return of their lands. More than six decades of bombing had contaminated the waters and beaches of Vieques, not only damaging the local economy but also seriously endangering the health of the population. The priorities of the people of Vieques included cleaning up those areas impacted by projectiles, dealing with the serious effects of the exercises on the health of the inhabitants and reclaiming those areas which had suffered serious environmental degradation. The struggle in Vieques continued to enjoy broad international solidarity.

36. The draft resolution was the result of far-reaching consultations with representatives of different political and social sectors in Puerto Rico and all Committee members. It also reflected the views of all members of the Non-Aligned Movement. He hoped that it would be adopted without a vote.

37. **Mr. Fuenmayor-Contreras** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) expressed support for the draft resolution and reiterated his Government's support for the self-determination of Puerto Rico. The emergence of the Commonwealth in 1952 had not changed Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the federal Government of the administering Power, nor had it eliminated the authority of the latter's Congress over the "territory". His Government was therefore in favour of decolonizing Puerto Rico by way of a mechanism that ensured the full participation of all Puerto Ricans, such as an assembly on the status of the Puerto Rican people where any initiative aimed at resolving the island's political status came directly from the Puerto Rican people.

38. **The Chairman** said that, if he heard no objection, he would take it that the Committee wished to adopt draft resolution A/AC.109/2005/L.7 without a vote.

39. *It was so decided.*

40. **Mr. Requeijo Gual** (Cuba) expressed his appreciation to the petitioners, who had come from Puerto Rico, New York and elsewhere in the United States, and to Committee members for their solidarity with the self-determination of Puerto Rico.

The meeting rose at 4 p.m.